

# United States Senate

February 26, 2020

President Donald J. Trump  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write to express my deep concern about your administration's response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the United States over a month ago, your administration has failed to take necessary steps to address this crisis and provide adequate information to Congress and the American people, raising serious questions about your administration's ability to prepare for and contain COVID-19.

You have stated that the virus is "very well under control in our country" and that you "think the whole situation will start working out."<sup>1</sup> Your National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow has also minimized the ongoing threat of COVID-19 spread, stating "We have contained this...it's pretty close to airtight"<sup>2</sup> Mr. President, denying the seriousness of this public health crisis will not keep Americans safe. You must act and, to date, you have not done nearly enough.

To start, the American people deserve to hear from administration leaders about plans to address this global public health crisis. For weeks, I have been calling for public hearings in the Senate with senior officials from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and State. Almost six weeks after this crisis began, Congress is finally getting our first opportunity to question administration officials about COVID-19 in public hearings. This delay is simply unacceptable.

The surge of outbreaks in other nations across the globe—from South Korea to Iran to Italy—only heightens the need for public hearings. The World Health Organization appears ready to upgrade the outbreak to a pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Your own public health officials said yesterday that it is not a question of "if" COVID-19 will spread through the United States, but "when [it] will

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<sup>1</sup> Courtney Subramaniam and John Fritze, *Trump Say Coronavirus 'Under Control' Despite Warnings from Health Officials of 'Severe' Disruptions*, USATODAY, Feb. 25, 2020, available at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/02/25/trump-downplays-coronavirus-after-requesting-emergency-funding/4865886002/>

<sup>2</sup> Fred Imbert, *Larry Kudlow Says US Has Contained the Coronavirus and the Economy is Holding Up Nicely*, CNBC, Feb. 25, 2020, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/25/larry-kudlow-says-us-has-contained-the-coronavirus-and-the-economy-is-holding-up-nicely.html>

<sup>3</sup> Helen Branswell, *WHO Tells Countries to Prepare for Coronavirus Pandemic, But Insists It's Too Soon to Make That Call*, STATNEWS, Feb. 24, 2020, available at <https://www.statnews.com/2020/02/24/who-tells-countries-prepare-coronavirus-pandemic-too-soon-to-make-call/>

happen and how many people...will have severe illness.”<sup>4</sup> The American people need to hear directly from the officials who are responsible for responding to and containing the virus, not from reports of closed-door meetings and tweets.

More than any other state, California has been on the front lines of the COVID-19 response. California communities are stepping up to respond to this outbreak—screening and testing incoming travelers, hosting over 800 repatriated and quarantined individuals, and caring for those recovering from the virus—despite poor coordination and vague guidance from the federal government. Further, your administration has yet to reimburse state and local entities for costs incurred as part of the federal response to COVID-19 – or even provided written assurances of any plan to do so.

Your emergency supplemental appropriations request from February 24, 2020 did not address my concerns regarding your administration’s strategy to prevent further spread of the virus in the United States. In addition to being far smaller than previous emergency supplemental requests and falling short of recommendations from public health experts,<sup>5</sup> your request also relies on raiding public health funding from other critical priorities. In addition, your Fiscal Year 2021 budget request that would cut funding for programs critical to response efforts, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>6</sup> and the World Health Organization.<sup>7</sup> And your Secretary of Health and Human Services has already admitted that the United States only has 10 percent of the protective facemasks needed for U.S. health care workers.<sup>8</sup> All of this will further weaken the United States’ ability to address this crisis and prevent American lives from being lost. We cannot afford to continue to wait for a credible, comprehensive plan to address the crisis.

Your administration’s propensity to minimize its challenges, combined with its longstanding refusal to participate in adequate oversight, is now threatening our nation’s public health. At a minimum, your administration must:

1. Correct problems with COVID-19 diagnostic test kits and make them available to hospitals and public health labs in all states.
2. Take all necessary steps to guarantee the adequate supply of protective facemasks for U.S. health care workers and the American public, including to produce them domestically.

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<sup>4</sup> Erika Edwards, *Americans Should Prepare for Coronavirus Crisis in U.S., CDC Says*, NBC NEWS, Feb. 25, 2020, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/americans-should-prepare-coronavirus-spread-u-s-cdc-says-n1142556>

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Cook and Caitlin Emma, *Trump Sending Coronavirus Budget Request to Congress*, POLITICO, Feb. 24, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/24/trump-coronavirus-budget-request-117275>

<sup>6</sup> Joel Achenbach, Laurie McGinley, Amy Goldstein, and Ben Guarino, *Trump Budget Cuts Funding for Health, Science, Environment Agencies*, WASHINGTON POST, Feb. 10, 2020, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/trump-budget-cuts-funding-for-health-science-environment-agencies/2020/02/10/9c8dd784-4c2d-11ea-b721-9f4cdc90bc1c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/trump-budget-cuts-funding-for-health-science-environment-agencies/2020/02/10/9c8dd784-4c2d-11ea-b721-9f4cdc90bc1c_story.html)

<sup>7</sup> Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch, *Trump Seeks to Halve U.S. Funding for World Health Organization as Coronavirus Rages*, FOREIGN POLICY, Feb. 10, 2020, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/10/trump-world-health-organization-funding-coronavirus-state-department-usaid-budget-cuts/>

<sup>8</sup> Dawn Kopecki, Berkeley Lovelace Jr., and William Feuer, *CDC Outlines Pandemic Planning, As Fears Send Stocks Plunging For Second Day*, CNBC, Feb. 25, 2020, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/25/coronavirus-latest-updates.html>



3. Ensure greater transparency and better coordination with state and local entities, including by appointing a single federal official responsible for COVID-19 response.
4. Immediately reimburse state and local entities for costs already incurred in responding to the virus.
5. Make funds available to state and local entities now for ongoing and future response efforts so that they are not forced to rely on delayed federal reimbursement.
6. Commit administration officials to fully cooperate with Congress, including routine public testimony at Congressional hearings, timely responses to requests for information, and responses to oversight inquiries.

Thank you for your attention to this issue. I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator

CC:

Secretary Azar  
Secretary Pompeo  
Acting Secretary Wolf  
Secretary Ross